

Bush on NBC: Rehabilitating a war criminal

By Patrick Martin
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Former president George W. Bush kicked off a week-long book promotion tour with a television interview broadcast on NBC in which he defended every crime committed by his administration, from the illegal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to torture, to the abandonment of New Orleans and the Gulf coast during Hurricane Katrina.

The NBC interview is the beginning of a systematic effort to politically rehabilitate the disgraced former president. Bush left office in January 2009 with the lowest approval of any US president since Herbert Hoover, denounced internationally as a mass murderer whose proper fate would be to face a war crimes tribunal.

Bush will follow up the hour-long prime-time interview with appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show, the Today Show, and other watering holes on the celebrity publicity circuit, aimed at boosting sales of his book, which is expected to earn him tens of millions of dollars. Republican Party leaders reportedly pressed him not to release the book until after the November 2 election, to avoid antagonizing voters.

The greatest media attention has been on Bush's boast that he personally authorized the torture of three Al Qaeda prisoners. Bush had previously acknowledged his role as the ultimate decider on waterboarding, in an interview with Martha Raddatz of ABC News in April 2008. (See: "Top Bush aides directed torture from the White House")

But it was the first time that the former president has discussed the subject since he left office, and he seemed to relish this chapter of his presidency, at one point urging his interviewer, Today Show host Matt Lauer, "Let's talk about waterboarding."

Bush blandly denied that waterboarding was torture, despite the consensus among human rights groups, including the International Commission of the Red Cross, that waterboarding and many other forms of interrogation used at Guantanamo Bay, Bagram and CIA secret prisons violate the Geneva Conventions. Prior to Bush, waterboarding was viewed as a war crime by the US military, and Japanese officers were tried and prosecuted after World War II for using water torture.

The former president claimed that waterboarding was not

torture because the lawyers he consulted had said so. This is a transparently circular argument, since these lawyers worked in the Justice Department as his employees, and devised legal opinions to legitimize the actions that Bush, Cheney & Co. wanted to carry out. By that standard, Hitler's "final solution" was also legal, because it conformed to German law as laid down by the Nazis.

While Bush argued that the waterboarding was justified because it "saved lives," supposedly by giving US officials advance warning of terrorist operations, no evidence has ever been presented to support such claims. Last year the *New York Times* reported that the real motivation for the torture of Khalid Sheikh Muhammed (waterboarded 183 times) and Abu Zubaida (waterboarded 83 times) was to extract testimony from them about a nonexistent Al Qaeda connection to Saddam Hussein, to strengthen the Bush administration's case for invading Iraq.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, "This fact establishes a direct connection between the violation of domestic and international laws barring torture, the preparation of an unprovoked war of aggression against Iraq, and a conspiracy by the president and his top officials to deceive the American people and drag them into war on the basis of lies." (See: "Bush, top cabinet officials monitored torture of detainees")

The rest of the hour-long interview featured friendly questions from Lauer and smirking, self-justifying answers from Bush. The discussion was structured around the "decision points" which are the focus of Bush's newly released memoir of the same name, and excluded large swathes of the history of the Bush administration.

In particular, there seems to have been a ban on questions about politics. Lauer asked nothing about the stolen 2000 election, which placed Bush in the White House; about the 2002 election, during which the Bush administration pushed through a vote in Congress to authorize war in Iraq, warning of "mushroom clouds" over American cities otherwise; about Bush's reelection campaign in 2004; or about the 2006 election, in which the Republican Party was swept out of power in a wave of popular hostility to Bush and his policies, particularly the war in Iraq.

Bush gave predictable, formulaic answers to questions about 9/11 (he said he never asked whether more could have been done to prevent the terrorist attacks), the decision to go to war in Iraq, the failure to find the “weapons of mass destruction” that were the pretext for the war, the atrocity photos from Abu Ghraib, and his handling of the Katrina disaster and the Wall Street collapse of September-October 2008.

The only regret he expressed over the war in Iraq was his appearance on an aircraft carrier in May 2003 under the banner “Mission Accomplished,” which proved a public relations disaster. Of the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Bush claimed, “No one was more shocked or angry than I was.”

When Lauer asked him whether he had considered apologizing for leading the country into war on false pretenses, Bush rejected the suggestion. “I mean, apologizing would basically say the decision was a wrong decision,” he said. “And I don’t believe it was the wrong decision.”

Lauer asked him whether he would do the same thing again if he had known then what he knows now. Bush evaded the issue, replying, “I, first of all, didn’t have that luxury. You just don’t have the luxury when you’re president.”

This is the kind of response that is meant to sound tough-minded, but actually has zero content. What’s past is past for everyone, not just presidents. That doesn’t prevent human beings from reflecting on the past and considering what could have been done differently. Bush wishes to avoid, not just retrospection, but above all, accountability.

Lauer was always deferential, never suggesting, let alone expressing, the visceral hatred that millions of Americans felt and feel for the former “commander-in-chief.” Some of his questions were of a disgustingly fawning character. How had the support of military families sustained him when the American public turned against the war in Iraq? Did Bush feel he got enough credit for the decision to escalate the war in late 2006 (the “surge”)?

When Bush offered transparent evasions of questions, there was little or no attempt to follow up. Did he expect the war in Afghanistan to last so long? Bush replied that “building a democracy takes a long time,” and Lauer made no effort to point out the absurdity of applying such a label to the corrupt narco-puppet state of Hamid Karzai.

When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld offered to resign over Abu Ghraib, why had Bush decided to keep him? Bush said he couldn’t find anyone else to fill the job, a non-answer if there ever was one.

On Katrina, Bush admitted to errors of public relations, not performance, such as the notorious photo of his flyover

of the drowned city of New Orleans. The actual failure to forestall the disaster and rescue the survivors he attributed entirely to local and state officials.

The discussion of Katrina brought the moment most revealing of the small, narrow-minded personality of George W. Bush, as he described the statement by rap singer Kanye West, attributing the administration’s failure to the fact that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people,” as the low point of his presidency.

Even Lauer was non-plussed by this. “You’re not saying that the worst moment in your presidency was watching the misery in Louisiana,” he said. “You’re saying it was when someone insulted you because of that.”

He could have added that Bush felt this criticism more deeply than the 3,000 killed on 9/11, or the 4,000 US dead in Iraq, or the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis slaughtered in that war.

Bush made a point of not criticizing his successor, without acknowledging that Obama has largely continued his policies, including the two wars, the bailouts of Wall Street and the auto industry, the use of secret detention, spying, torture, and, in a significant escalation of the attack on democratic rights, the assertion of the president’s right to order the assassination of an American citizen.

He could have been speaking for Obama as he defended the decision to bail out the big financial institutions that precipitated the crisis of September-October 2008, saying he “had to abandon the free market to save the free market.” Bush went on to say that the financial disaster was “not a crisis of the lack of regulation,” another claim that Lauer did not challenge or follow up.

According to press reports, there is not a word of criticism of Obama in Bush’s 477-page memoir, and the former president expresses his support for the escalation of the war in Afghanistan, where Obama has followed the example of the Bush “surge” in Iraq by ordering an additional 70,000 US troops into the Central Asian country.

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